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OPINION: WONDER LAND | FEBRUARY 5, 2009

What Is Congress Stimulating?

By DANIEL HENNINGER



What's most striking is how much "stimulus" money will be spent on the government itself.

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Contrary to conventional Beltway wisdom, the House Republicans' zero votes for the Obama presidency's stimulus "package" is looking like the luckiest thing to happen to the GOP's political fortunes since Ronald Reagan switched parties. If the GOP line holds, the party could win back much of the goodwill it dissipated with its big-government adventures the past eight years.



Face the Nation, Karin Cooper

'How big?' senator, is not the question.

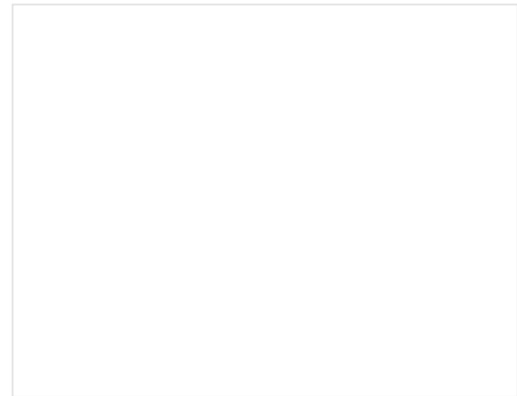
For starters, notwithstanding the new president's high approval rating, his stimulus bill (ghost-written by Nancy Pelosi) has been losing altitude with public opinion by the day. People are nervous.

Then after Tim Geithner scampered through the tax minefield and into a Cabinet seat, the Daschle tax bomb went off, laying open for public view the world of Washington's pay-for-favors that makes the average Wall Street banker look like Little Bo-Peep.

Conventional wisdom holds that the Republican refuseniks shot themselves in the foot by staying off the House stimulus package. Real wisdom holds that congressional Republicans should consider putting distance between themselves and anything Democratic just now. The party's crypts are opening.

The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, with an apparently recession-proof cash hoard, is running radio ads against 28 House Republicans. The theme of the ads is "Putting Families First."

Families first? The only family standing at the front of the stimulus pay line is the federal family. Read the bill.



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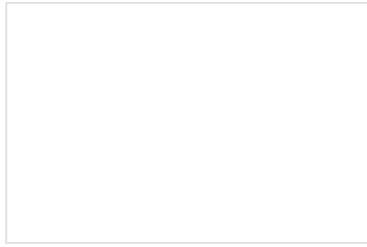
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- Daniel Henninger: What Is Congress Stimulating? The Geithner Exception Obama at History's 'Hinge Point'

About Daniel Henninger

Daniel Henninger is deputy editor of The Wall Street Journal's editorial page. Mr. Henninger joined Dow Jones in 1971 as a staff writer for the National Observer. He became an editorial-page writer for the Journal in 1977, arts editor in 1978 and editorial features editor in 1980. He was appointed assistant editor of the editorial page in 1983 and chief editorial writer and senior assistant editor in October 1986, with daily responsibility for the "Review & Outlook" columns. In November 1989 he became deputy editor of the editorial page.

Mr. Henninger was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize in editorial



Wonder Land columnist Daniel Henninger asks why our government needs stimulus money. (Feb. 5)

Check your PC's virus program, then pull down the nearly 700 pages of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Dive into its dank waters and what is most striking is how much "stimulus" money is being spent on the government's own infrastructure. This bill isn't economic stimulus. It's self-stimulus.

(All sums here include the disorienting zeros, as in the bill.)

Title VI, Financial Services and General

Government, says that "not less than \$6,000,000,000 shall be used for construction, repair, and alteration of Federal buildings." There's enough money there to name a building after every Member of Congress.

The Bureau of Land Management gets \$325,000,000 to spend fixing federal land, including "trail repair" and "remediation of abandoned mines or well sites," no doubt left over from the 19th-century land rush.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are getting \$462,000,000 for "equipment, construction, and renovation of facilities, including necessary repairs and improvements to leased laboratories."

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The National Institute of Standards gets \$357,000,000 for the "construction of research facilities." The Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration gets \$427,000,000 for that. The country is in

an economic meltdown and the federal government is redecorating.

The FBI gets \$75,000,000 for "salaries and expenses." Inside the \$6,200,000,000 Weatherization Assistance Program one finds "expenses" of \$500,000,000. How many bureaucrats does it take to "expense" a half-billion dollars?

The current, Senate-amended version now lists "an additional amount to be deposited in the Federal Buildings Fund, \$9,048,000,000." Of this, "not less than \$6,000,000,000 shall be available for measures necessary to convert GSA facilities to High-Performance Green Buildings." High performance?

Sen. Tom Coburn is threatening to read the bill on the floor of the Senate. I have a better idea: Read it on "Saturday Night Live."

Such as the amendment to Section 2(3)(F) of the Longshore and Harbor Workers' Compensation Act, which will permit payments to guys employed to repair "recreational vessels." Under Incentives for New Jobs, we find a credit to employ what the bill calls "disconnected youths," defined as "not readily employable by reason of lacking a sufficient number of basic skills."

President Obama is saying the bill will "create or save" three million new jobs. The bad news is your new boss is Uncle Sam.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell says, "Everybody agrees that there ought to be a stimulus package. The question is: How big and what do we spend it on?"

Sen. McConnell should reconsider. He knows that the Bush-GOP spending spree cost them control of Congress in 2006. Thus, "How big?" is not the question his party's constituents (or horrified independents) want answered. This is a chance for the GOP to climb down from its big-government dunce chair. Until that reversal is achieved, there is no hope for this party.

I think that behind the bill's sinking public support is the sense that it won't work and its cost is dangerous. The bill's design, an embarrassment to Rube Goldberg, is flawed. Even were one to grant the Keynesians their argument, this is a very mushy, weak-form stimulus.

Rather than try to "reform" it, which won't happen, Sen. McConnell should ask President Obama to pull it and start over. One guesses that privately the president's economic team would thank the senator. If he won't pull it, the Senate Republicans should walk away from it. This bill is a bomb. It may wreck more than it saves.

writing in 1987 and 1996, and shared in the Journal's Pulitzer Prize in 2002 for the paper's coverage of the attacks on September 11. In 2004, he won the Eric Breindel Journalism Award for his "Wonder Land" column. He won the Gerald Loeb Award for commentary in 1985. In 1998 he received the Scripps Howard Foundation's Walker Stone Award for editorial writing, for editorials on a range of issues, including the International Monetary Fund, presidential politics and cloning. He won the 1995 American Society of Newspaper Editors' Distinguished Writing Award for editorial writing, and he was a finalist in that award in 1985, 1986 and 1993. A native of Cleveland, Mr. Henninger graduated from Georgetown University with a bachelor's degree from the School of Foreign Service.

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